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ABSTRACT

An experience in evaluating a program which is designed to help high risk adolescents is described. The program attempts to develop basic work and social skills of adolescents (N=40) living in slums or on the streets in Brazil. Psychological and social effects of the program were assessed by means of interviews and psychological tests (Draw-a-Person, Bender Gestalt, Raven, and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale). Results showed that, despite the risk factors, large improvements took place in test performance. Additionally, the adolescents developed more realistic life projects and positive attitudes toward school and work. Some problems of using psychological tests with this particular population are discussed. It is also pointed out that such programs cannot be successful unless they eventually provide employment opportunities or referrals. (Author/TS)

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Running head: TRAINING PROGRAM

Evaluation of a Training Program for Street Children and Adolescents at Risk in Brazil

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Abstract

This paper describes an experience in evaluation of a program designed to help high risk adolescents living in slums or on the streets in Brazil to develop basic work and social skills. Psychological and social effects of the program were assessed by means of interviews and psychological tests (Draw-a-Person, Bender Gestalt, Raven, and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale). The results showed that, despite the risk factors, large improvements took place in test performance and that the adolescents also developed more realistic life projects and positive attitudes toward school and work. Some problems of using psychological tests with this population are discussed. It is also pointed out that such programs cannot be successful unless they eventually provide employment opportunities or referrals.

Evaluation of a Training Program for Street Children and Adolescents at Risk in Brazil

The present paper describes an experience in evaluation of a program designed to help high risk adolescents living in slums or on the streets in Brazil to develop basic work and social skills. In many developing countries, like Brazil, traditional intervention programs have often failed to deliver appropriate social services or to promote desirable social changes. Funding agencies and private companies that invest money in such programs are rightfully becoming more stringent and are demanding results, concrete outcomes of the investment. Therefore, the evaluation of ongoing programs, assessing their objectives, progress, and results is an absolute necessity in these times of scarce resources. Such evaluations help to decide if a given program should go on, promote modifications, or even extinguish it. Community psychology researchers can give an important contribution in this area because evaluation is a kind of applied social research that require systematization and planning (Aguilar & Ander-Egg, 1994).

The training program described here was sponsored and developed by TRENSURB, the metro company of Porto Alegre, Brazil. It is a combination of a job training and a remedial educational program for adolescents at high social and personal risk. We described the characteristics of this population elsewhere (Hutz, Bandeira, Koller, & Forster, 1995; Hutz, Koller, Bandeira, & Forster, 1995). The main objectives of the program were to give these adolescents the conditions to enter the job market and become economically

independent. The adolescents worked as trainees in some divisions of the company, as clerks or as blue collar workers, under the supervision of an experienced employee who volunteered for the task. The company also offered them tutoring to improve school performance, sports, and cultural activities.

The participants of this project were 40 adolescents who were living in slums with their families or who were already living on the streets or in shelters. We did not have any participation in the selection of participants, who were referred to the program by institutions that provide services for this population. The referrals were made based on degree of poverty, but most adolescents (62.5%) participating in this program had no idea why they were chosen to participate. Only about 10% of the participants were aware of the criteria used to refer them.

There were 27 boys and 13 girls, 13 to 17 years old ($M = 14.7$). All of them were attending school, but three of them were in a special school for street children. When the program started, 15% of the participants slept in shelters or in the streets, 20% lived in institutions for abandoned children, and 65% lived at home with their families. About 80% of the adolescents had regular contact with their families.

To evaluate the effect of the program, the participants were interviewed and tested at the beginning of the intervention and eight months later. The interview was designed to assess psychological, social, and vocational aspects of the adolescents' life. Psychological assessment was also made by employing the Draw-a-Person test (DAP), the Bender-Gestalt Test, Raven's Standard Progressive Matrices, and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale. The DAP

and the Bender-Gestalt tests were scored using the systems developed by Koppitz (1968, 1976).

We used the data from the pretest to advise the program staff about the characteristics of the participants, helping to place the adolescents within the organization. We also served as consultants during the program, helping the staff to deal effectively with the participants.

Data from the posttest showed some impressive positive changes in the subjects, but they also showed some failures that required important changes in the organization of the program and in its objectives. The first interesting finding was an increase in contact with the family. Except for the adolescents who were abandoned and could not locate their relatives, all others looked for and tried to establish closer ties with their families. Unfortunately, some attempts to go back home resulted in failure. Clearly the program has to develop strategies to help adolescents and their families to live together, to cope with family conflict and hostility. Unless some of the major factors that pushed the adolescents into the streets are resolved, going back home will not help them or their families.

Life plans and expectations also showed important changes. Most adolescents had either unrealistic or no life projects at the beginning of the program. By the end of the program, it became important for all of them to go on studying and to find a job. They revised their ideas about what kind of work they could do in the future and had a more clear perspective about their possibilities.

The DAP showed no change in the number of developmental items. Such items are associated with intelligence and body image. However, a significant decrease was found in the number of items that indicate emotional disturbance. There was also a significant

reduction in the number of errors in the Bender-Gestalt test and a significant increase in Raven's scores. The Rosenberg's Scale revealed no significant differences.

These data suggest that major psychological changes may have occurred as a result of participation in the program. The better performance on the DAP emotional disturbance indicators, on the Bender-Gestalt test, and on the Raven test is certainly very positive. The stable means for developmental items in the DAP suggested that the improvement observed in other tests should not be attributed to maturity or age changes. However, some caution is needed to interpret these changes. It is not likely that intelligence (factor g) has actually increased by several points after an eight-month program, however successful it may have been, as suggested by the increase in Raven's scores. Probably there was an improvement in test-taking skills rather than in intelligence. There is some evidence that improving the environment in which Brazilian lower class adolescents live and study may result in improved performance in some intelligence tests, like the WISC and the Raven (Paine, Dorea, Pasquali, & Monteiro 1992). For eight months our adolescents had the experience of working and studying in a large organization that guarantees rights but also sets limits and imposes obligations. They were exposed to distinct role models, they learned new skills, and they gained a new perspective for life. Also, anxiety was reduced and, according to the interviewers, the adolescents behaved very differently in the beginning and in the end of the program. The adolescents showed less resistance to take the tests, greater concentration and attention. These changes probably explain the better performance in the Raven and Bender tests.

The use of tests with this population poses some questions. Most psychological tests were not developed for use with samples like ours. The validity of most of these techniques is at best unknown for assessment of street children or children and adolescents who live in deep poverty. It may be risky to assume that even tests like the DAP are indeed culture-free and can be used with any population (Hutz & Antoniazzi, 1995). The lack of significant differences between the pre- and posttest in self-esteem using Rosenberg's scale is probably explained by the difficulty the adolescents had to understand the statements. Although this scale was validated for use with Brazilian adolescents, validation studies were carried out with high-school students. Most subjects in our sample failed to understand the vocabulary of the scale. Considering the evidence from interviews that self-esteem had indeed increased during the program, this finding showed again how problematic it can be to test subjects of very low SES with measures developed for middle-class groups. Clearly there is a need to develop norms and conduct validity studies with psychological tests to work with this population.

Despite these drawbacks, the data showed that the program was successful in promoting changes in the image the adolescents had about work and study. It contributed to increase self-empowerment and to develop an expectation of becoming financially independent through work.

One major problem the program faced was what to do with the adolescents after the training was completed. This was not an unforeseen problem. From the beginning we pointed out and discussed with the program staff about the need to refer the adolescents to jobs. However, it is much easier to identify a problem such as this than to find solutions. The

program failed to provide referrals or to help the participants in any meaningful way to find a job. Some adolescents found jobs by themselves and a few were accepted in more advanced training programs that will give them skills to compete effectively for a job.

The metro company will keep the program alive, with adjustments and corrections. Steps are being taken, however, to establish a network of organizations that could hire these adolescents after they complete the training. Most of the benefits produced by training programs like this one will be lost eventually if the adolescents cannot find jobs or further training.

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